

LOI 2015

Gospel as Foundation for Mission: The Theological Basis

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(Draft Text – Not for general distribution)

I. Introduction

It is never very interesting to start with a caveat, yet it seems the title of this chapter warrants one rather desperately. Gospel. Foundation. Mission. Theological basis. One could spend a lifetime reflecting and writing on just one of those terms, let alone on all four put together. To add to our challenge, the request is for “The” theological basis, as if there were just one, if one at all.

Shaped in the post-modern, anti-foundationalist tradition, where fundamentalism and relativism are basically understood as two sides of the same coin,¹ I prefer to shy away from an idea of a (or ‘the’) basis, and to focus on the terms ‘Gospel’ and ‘Mission’ as we think together about how these relate and how they shape our theologies and practices in our ever-changing world.

An implied notion of story or narrative in words such as ‘Gospel’ and ‘Mission’ will help to illustrate the ways in which we learn to hear God’s call and to participate in mission together. The context of the Lausanne – Orthodox Initiative, where the practices of listening and learning to one another’s stories and building friendships with people of different traditions helps reinforce and strengthen the possibilities for greater cooperation and service to God in the future. I am very grateful that such an initiative exists!

As Baptist pastor and scholar H. Stephen Shoemaker has argued, humans are *homo narratus*.² We are story-formed creatures and whenever we neglect or make less of our own or of someone else’s story, we are being less than human. God works through narratives, through transforming the scripts of our worlds, our contexts and our lives. The Gospel and Mission are intimately related to such transformational narratives. Indeed, together, they are the “master” narrative of transformation.

In order to think theologically and biblically about the relationship between Gospel and Mission in the context of these dialogues and this initiative, I will briefly examine some characteristics of what we are calling “The Gospel of Jesus Christ.” Following this we will consider some of the implications of such characteristics for how we

¹ McClendon Jr, James Wm. and Murphy, Nancey, “Distinguishing Modern and Postmodern Theologies,” *Modern Theology* 5 (April 1989), pp. 191-214.

² Shoemaker, H. Stephen. *Godstories: New narratives from sacred texts*, Judson Press, 1998, pp. xiii-xvi.

understand mission. In the conclusion I will offer some pointers or suggestions for how reframing some aspects of our theology of mission might help us better understand and learn from one another. Furthermore, I would argue that a very serious implication of understanding the fullness of the gospel implies that our understanding of mission is shaped not by our agendas, but by coming alongside one another and listening to what God has to say to us as we serve God's world for the sake of God's kingdom.

II. Gospel Traits

1. The particularity of the Gospel

It isn't any good news we have received or any good news we proclaim. It's the particular news, the particular story of God the creator, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God who raised Jesus from the dead. It is the story of the formation of a particular people at a particular point in time and with a particular mission – we will get to the mission later.

History matters in all our considerations of the gospel. Essential to the gospel is the narrative of the shaping of this particular people in history, the people through whom all the nations will be blessed. It is a history and a story that culminates in a very particular person.

The angel Gabriel visited one town, one virgin. It is a story that reaches its climax in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. We do not proclaim any messiah, but Christ crucified and risen.

Too often in the history of the world and certainly in the history of Christian mission, the particularity of the gospel story has been lost or neglected, sometimes with dire consequences. Paying attention to such particularities is not a denial of the many contexts in which the gospel takes root, nor is it necessarily an imposition of one cultural context upon another. Rather, as was mentioned earlier, it is paying attention to the story-formed character of the good news of Christ. All stories have contexts and histories within which God works. Taking such contexts seriously makes us even more able, more open to the ways in which the good news shapes and is shaped by other contexts.

As Latin American theologian, René Padilla wrote, in Jesus of Nazareth God contextualized himself. "God does not shout his message from the heavens; God becomes present as a human being among human beings."³ As we consider the many characteristics of the gospel and their implication for mission, it is necessary always to keep such contextualization in mind.

2. The universality of the Gospel as a challenge to our identities

³ Padilla, C. René. *Mission between the times: Essays on the kingdom*. Langham Monographs, 2010, p. 103.

Yes, the gospel is very particular, but it is also global, universal. What comes to mind when you think “global”? Perhaps our tendency is to think big:

Big as in large scale – mega cities, mega churches, massive numbers of people and crowds, the Olympics or the World Cup.

Big as in diversity – people from all over, different people, different languages and cultures.

Big as in big problems – global warming, global hunger, global war.

But global gospel or global mission? Generally such terms might be deemed colonial or seen as an imposition. And yet... the gospel is indeed global, universal, and about the transformation of all of the cosmos. Consider the global scope of God’s promise to Abraham: “Go from your country and your kindred... and I will bless you... so that you will be a blessing... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:1-3). In the Gospel of St John: “For God so loved the world...” is about as global as one can get.

The scope of the gospel challenges the ways that shape the church’s identity (and our own identities). The particularity of our histories, of wars both theological and missiological, of divisions within peoples and denominations has the tendency to push us towards protecting what we see to be “our way of life.” This was the challenge at the tower of Babel.

The people at Babel had two main concerns that are very similar to concerns we see today and in every age across the globe. These were:

- (i) The concern over identity – who are we? Will people remember our name? What if we are not valued?
- (ii) The concern over security – the concern of fear and vulnerability – what if we are scattered and dispersed? What if we become exiles or homeless?

These are very real fears and concerns in the world today, both in terms of people’s physical well being and the challenges that come to churches in war-torn areas or places of persecution. These are also spiritual and psychological fears of many people and many churches in the west. Too often we want the power and the fame and we fear being scattered and unknown. The good news of Jesus challenges these fears and pushes us towards a different understanding of mission.

The solution to their fears in Babel was all about themselves – it was this sense of “we can take care of this on our own.” They had no concern for God or for seeking God’s wisdom and saving help. They had technology (Gen 11:3: bricks, mortar) and they used this without any concern for the earth or for the effects of their use of these resources to secure their identity and safety.

In contemporary terms, the sin of the people at Babel was the sin of empire – it is the grasping for power and control, making others look up to oneself or one’s church, and trusting in one’s own strengths rather than pointing to Jesus and being dependent on God. Historically, in the context of Christian mission, this type of sin has played itself out in various ways. It can be seen in coercive attempts to ‘convert’

others to the Gospel; in the self-centred focus that the church often has on itself and in securing its own goals rather than God's; and even in the church's fear of "mixing" with others who might make it different or who could upset the status quo. Unity that is based on uniformity, fear and a sense of determining one's own identity is not the unity of the good news of Jesus.

The sin of Babel also shows itself in more subtle ways, such as the presupposition that western forms of Christianity are the standards by which other cultures' adherence to the gospel should be judged. In general terms, the missionary movements that grew rapidly in the 19th and 20th centuries took the good news of the gospel around the world, but with them they carried their own cultural trappings and presumptions that 'church' must look the same whether it is located in cold northern Europe or tropical Latin America. The problem is not that the missionaries and evangelists were culturally bound – being of a particular culture is part of what it means to be human. Rather, the danger was twofold: first, there was the failure to recognize one's own cultural 'boundedness' – western Christianity is just as 'native', 'cultural' and 'ethnic' as African or Asian Christianity. Second, and related to this first point, they sometimes failed to see the need to re-tell the gospel story within the particularities of the cultures to which the good news was taken, or they denied and trampled upon other cultures thinking that such was the way to preach Jesus. I believe these are still dangers that any church faces today, but especially those who have power or wealth – Christian witness is about Jesus, not about making everyone look the same or look like us. We need one another to be able to see our own blind spots and we need to pray often for discernment and care as we seek to be faithful to Christ in ever-changing landscapes.

Wherever the gospel is taken – east, west, north, or south – it is both culturally bound – it is the story of God's dealings with a particular people and coming to us in a Jewish man of the 1st century, but it also challenges and changes the landscape of the culture to which it is introduced. Jesus challenged the religious landscape of his day and challenges ours today. If the gospel does not challenge and transform all our fallen cultures, it has not truly taken root in such cultures.

The desire for power and fame were some of the sins of Babel. These remain challenges to genuine Christian unity today. Whenever the church points first to itself rather than to its Lord, it is behaving like Babel, making a name for itself, rather than trusting the gospel. According to the biblical text, it is specifically for this reason that the people decide to build the tower (v. 4), and it is also because of this that God decides to confuse their language and scatter them all over the earth. The text does not contain one verb of judgment or condemnation. Rather, there is the suggestion that the type of oneness for which humanity strives is that type which leads to total independence from God. At Babel the people took no notice of God, but God took notice of them. If the church is pointing to itself or to its ministries rather than looking to God or pointing others to Jesus, then it is failing in its obedience to the gospel, it is failing in its missionary task. If it is failing in its work of evangelism it is failing in unity as well, for unity and evangelism must be bound together.

In John 17 Jesus prays that the disciples be one for sake of their witness, so that the world can come to know Jesus and through Jesus, know the Father. At Babel the people failed to see that God is the only one through whom true unity is possible.

The universality of the gospel transforms who we are because we are invited into a bigger story, a story not of our own choosing, a story we were not even a part of. The gospel destabilises our identities. Who are we? We are strangers, foreigners listening in to God's conversation with a particular people and then hearing God say, 'Boo! I have news for you. It's not all about you or your church or your plans, but about how I'm going to make all things new through Jewish flesh.' It is so new, so universal that even God's people have to reorient themselves according to this good news. The gospel de-centres us in order to re-centre us. It is universal in that it reaches its climax in God coming in the form of human flesh to include us into that global story.

Remember that at one time you were without Christ... (Eph 2:12ff). This reorientation, this re-centring around Christ is for all. Both Jew and Gentile have to be reconfigured in the person of Jesus Christ.

3. The surprising Gospel

We are called to plant seeds, to witness to God's amazing love and the sacrifice of Jesus, but how the Spirit will grow the plant from that seed is not for us to determine. That plant might look really different from what we have known or even what we like. The gospel calls into question all our attempts to control, to lead as we see fit, to determine outcomes according to our desires or according to our understanding of how things should be. The gospel, by definition, resists any attempt to be colonized or to become empire. It is good news because it is the Spirit of God that is given as gift to the whole world and it is through this Spirit that we are sent out.

In the book of Jeremiah we read the prophet's famous letter to the exiles – plant gardens, build houses, marry, have a family. And then the surprising promise – in these things you will find the peace, the shalom of the city in which God has placed you; in doing these things you will find your own salvation (Jer. 29:7). This is the kind of surprise that the people do not like. As we know from Jeremiah's story, there is resistance and refusal to follow God's call to mission to the city, and they return to Egypt, their place of slavery. The gospel of surprise might also be a gospel that asks of the church today to be faithful, to practice mission in ways that are difficult and that demand greater humility. Yet it is in such faithfulness that God also surprises us.

We should expect to be surprised. It is in our story. God has promised to surprise and has done so again and again. Just as the disciples huddled in fear behind locked doors after the crucifixion, they were surprised at the appearance of Jesus, so also are we guided today by that same Spirit with which Jesus empowered them. It is the Spirit that led them to the wonder that was Pentecost and guides us still today. Just as in Pentecost or the road to Emmaus, the gospel will surprise us. Expect the unexpected.

III. The Missionary Gospel or the Gospel Mission

From that first calling of Abraham to the laws of Moses to Jeremiah's instructions to plant gardens and build houses, this gospel was always about showing in word, deed and character that there is only one true God. The particularity of the laws had a purpose, a global purpose, that Israel should show to the nations through its own living what it means to welcome the stranger, to care for the widow and the orphan, to care for the land and let it rest. If we lose this evangelistic nature we've lost the gospel. It is evangelistic inviting the whole world to join their many stories with the story of Jesus, each part being joined to the whole, but each part maintaining their distinctiveness. To understand evangelism within the framework of the global gospel is like looking at the parallel yet contrasting images of Pentecost and Babel. At Babel we see languages that divided, that confused, that tore apart. At Pentecost we see a picture of fire and languages, still as diverse and multi-faceted as Babel, but languages that reconcile, that worship and that serve. So in the book of Revelation there are peoples gathered as different as we are today, all sitting at that table to feast. These are snapshots of the missionary character of the gospel.

Jesus asks us to obey, to be faithful to God's calling. Such obedience, while not always easy, is based on love. The gospel's missionary impetus is joyful. Think of a child who does something for a parent simply to honour the parent, unconcerned about the results or the effectiveness of her actions. She does it out of love. So also we are called to live this gospel and to tell others about it simply because we love God, because God first loved us.

The missionary gospel recalls the early narratives of God's shaping of a new people, the narratives of the early church and the lives of the saints. We are called to be holy, set apart, as St Peter writes. Yet being set apart in mission is not about retreat or being exclusive. Rather, God's Spirit is setting us apart for God's purposes in this world, with our many differences, with our many roles. Some of us are set aside with priestly functions, some with hosting, others with feeding, with healing, with praying.

If our starting point is the good news of Jesus and our obedience to that we see both gospel and mission from another perspective. If we start with the fact that mission belongs to God, then we are free not only to learn and to be with one another, but we are also free to allow others and especially to allow God's Spirit to guide and to shape our mission, rather than controlling the outcomes ourselves.

Perhaps one of the gifts that these conversations can give us and can give our different contexts is the gift of a renewed hope in the work of the Spirit in mission. A secondary gift might be a renewed commitment to mission, to sharing the story of Jesus and to inviting others to join their lives to that grand story.

The missionary character of the gospel requires that our faithfulness to God is carried out with others. Just as Peter needed Paul to help him see where he was making a

mistake regarding the laws for the Gentiles, so we need one another. As we are drawn by the Spirit into closer communion with Christ, we are also drawn closer to one another. Within the context of mission praxis, sometimes being close to one another is difficult or uncomfortable. But drawing away from such difference also means pulling away from Christ who is at the centre.

Matthew the tax collector and Peter the fisherman were not natural friends. There was nothing in their world, in the politics or economics of their society that would make them friends, let alone partners in mission. Yet this is precisely the power of the gospel in mission – bringing people together and joining their stories to the grand story of God’s mission to redeem the world is only possible because of the gospel. It is the good news that compels us towards mission and it is the gospel that enables such mission.

Early on I mentioned narrative and story. We have looked at a few snapshots, a few brief stories from our Holy Scriptures that shed light on the gospel and our participation in God’s mission. My prayer is that we keep some of these images always in our minds. The calling of Abraham, confusion at the tower, gardens planted and houses built in Jeremiah, an angel, a virgin, the death of the Messiah, fire at Pentecost, the scandal of Gentile inclusion into the promises of another people, a banquet table. In the richness, the diversity and the particularity of these scenes, we can begin to glimpse the kingdom of the global gospel.